

On Losing Weight

Exactly three months ago, [I wrote about the Shangri-La Diet](#). While I started on it basically immediately, it wasn't until exactly two months ago that I got a scale to measure my weight with (so some data has been lost). Since I got the scale, however, I've lost over twenty pounds.

Shockingly, losing weight has to be one of the easiest things I've ever done. I simply don't eat unless I'm really hungry and then I eat as little as possible (a couple crackers, for example). Most days I just have a couple crackers in the evening. It saves time and money and hassle (and makes it easy to eat healthy) and while I do get some weird looks from friends at restaurants, always being a fussy eater that's nothing new. (Furthermore, [there's some evidence](#) that not eating significantly prolongs lifespan.)

The one thing that really did surprise me is that [while I predicted there would be strong social pressures to lose weight](#), in reality all the pressure seemed to go the other way. Friends and acquaintances urge me to eat more, doctors think I'm sick, family members suggest I have an eating disorder. Part of this is probably just due to novelty: While "eat less" is standard advice for losing weight, because we all have set points no one is actually able to pull it off. Thus when someone actually does lose weight by eating less, it's usually because they really are sick or something like that. But in my darker moments, I wonder if part of it is selfish. The extraordinarily thin people encouraging me to eat more, I darkly wonder, don't want me to be like them. The people who need to lose some weight don't like the example of my success. I don't like thinking this way, and I have no evidence for it, but it's hard to resist.

There's not much more to say; food is even less a part of my life than it was before. I still plan to lose more weight and will provide further updates accordingly. Still, since many people seem to be interested in the topic (and in keeping with the theme of my blog), a diary of my three months follows.

The first thing I noticed was the burping. When losing weight, it seems you burp quite a bit. But even worse is the feeling of *wanting* to burp. The olive oil, it seems, has inflated my stomach with gas, making me desperately want to burp, but I can't. In fact, it was so painful that I decided to stop taking the olive oil. I still ate less — it seems like once the olive oil lowered my set point, it was easy to keep things off from there. There were a couple days after eating lots where I would feel hungry for long periods of time and had to ignore it, but if I did that for a whole day, my set point went down, just like with the olive oil.

I [went back home](#) and saw some old friends at my high school's graduation. Many of them commented on how thin I was. I was kind of surprised, because I didn't think I was noticeably thinner yet, but I have to say I enjoyed the compliment. While on this vacation I told myself I'd forget the diet and would eat all the good home foods I missed. But even doing this, I couldn't gain weight while on vacation. I was taken out to a nice restaurant downtown but couldn't finish my hamburger (which I typically had no problem doing) — when I was half way through if I took another bite I felt like I was going to throw up, so I just stopped. When I got back, I weighed basically the same as when I'd left.

As I lost more weight I began to feel better. I'd look in the mirror and notice the fat that had disappeared from my chest, or when lying down I'd notice my legs were thinner. I felt like I had more energy. I felt happier. I felt more mobile, more able to move around and do things now that there was less of me. It felt wonderful.

One week I lost seven pounds in almost as many days and friends began to look at me with concern. But I didn't mind; I thought it was great. I had started eating significantly less, hardly anything at all really. When I moved into this new apartment (just as I was starting the diet), I thought I would have a hard time finding novel places to eat each day. But it hasn't been hard at all; I've hardly gone out to eat by myself once since I started the diet, except to treat myself to a food I already knew I loved.

Writing about a gastric bypass (a surgery in which the stomach is shrunk to help those who are extremely overweight lose weight) patient, surgeon Atul Gawande describes a sensation I found extremely familiar:

[...] She [lost so much weight that] was unrecognizable to anyone who had known her before, and even to herself. "I went to bars to see if I could get picked up—and I did," she said. "I always said no," she quickly added, laughing. "But I did it anyway."

The changes weren't just physical, though. She had slowly found herself to have a profound and unfamiliar sense of willpower over food. She no longer *had* to eat anything: "Whenever I eat, somewhere in the course of that time I end up asking myself, 'Is this good for you? Are you going to put on weight if you eat too much of this?' And I can just stop." The feeling baffled her. She knew, intellectually, that the surgery was why she no longer ate as much as she used to. Yet she felt as if she were choosing not to do it.

Studies report this to be a typical experience of successful gastric bypass patients. [...]

(Atul Gawande, *Complications*, 174)

The newfound willpower allowed me to be more conscious about my diet. I started thinking about what foods I wanted to eat and researching the topic of nutrition. I read Walter Willett's book about the results of his epidemiological nutrition studies and began looking at the labels of boxes I ate. I began ordering different things at restaurants when I did eat and buying different things at the supermarket. But most of all I found myself eating less.

When this proved not to be enough, I found myself exercising. I seemed to be more out-of-shape now than it did when I started — I suspect with all the weight loss I lost some other things too — but exercising was probably easier to find the motivation for now. I fixed up my watch and started timing myself, trying to make sure I lost the weight I wanted to; this, of course, after I already lost twenty pounds and had stopped eating almost entirely.

Losing weight had other effects too, some that saved further time. Although I feel I have more energy overall, I still get tired. Sometimes I just lie in bed thinking, when I feel little pops in my thighs as my body breaks into the fat it has stored up over the years to find energy to fuel me with. And at those moments I can only smile.

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